

Out of this world

Venus Blazing is classical music dressed up as West End spectacular. Is this the way to make people listen? Charlotte Cripps asks the composer

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It takes the composer Deirdre Gribbin two hours to put on her light-blue eye shadow, long red nails and artfully tousled bird's-nest wig for performances of her theatrical violin concerto - Venus Blazing. Wearing a lavish black dress and clutching a crystal, Gribbin will appear on stage with a bang, as an otherworldly "master of ceremonies", to guide the audience through her music, amid a cosmic visual spectacle. "I welcome the audience to my planet," says Gribbin, by way of explanation.

Classical composers don't usually make an appearance on stage, especially in a concert hall that has been transformed into a planetarium. But for the Venus Blazing tour - which features the violinist Ernst Kovacic and the Britten Sinfonia (wearing glow-in-the-dark planetary T-shirts), classical music is having a modern makeover.

So why the special effects? Directing this spectacular is Lou Stein, founder of the Gate Theatre, in London. He has joined forces with the lighting designer Jeffrey R Ravitz, who works for Bruce Springsteen and Dido. "To apply a rock and roll lighting instinct to contemporary classical music is a very interesting mix," says Stein.

Venus Blazing is the fifth collaboration between Gribbin and Stein. And, with the backing of the Contemporary Music Network and a grant from the PRS Foundation for new music, they can afford to make the show explosive. "A lot of contemporary classical music is sexy, hip and colourful, but its image is not," says Stein. "More people would listen to contemporary classical music if it was presented more attractively."

Gribbin agrees. "There is a healthy debate within the classical music world that has been sparked by our tour," she says softly, peering into a box containing her wig, which arrived this morning from the National Theatre. "The central question is whether a classical music concert needs to be enhanced ... as a way to attract a wider audience?" Gribbin, evidently, has decided to embrace the theatrical.

Stein - who was responsible for Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas at the Gate Theatre in 1982 - is also keen for classical music to take a new direction. "If we didn't keep up in the theatre with visual advancement, you would still be getting guys running around in tights doing Shakespeare," he says. "I think it is important that music, like theatre, reflects its time. This show has the fun, mischief and visual brightness to make it more accessible."

Does the lighting detract from the music? "I think it really heightens it," he says. "As a theatre director, it is tempting to do a big number, but it is about finding the balance of being bold enough to push things forward, for it to feel rock and roll, but not so bold that we get more interested in the lights than the music. If that happens, we have failed." Stein has invented the Venus Blazer cocktail, sparkling wine and Cointreau, "to get you in the mood".

The duo first started to experiment with repackaging classical music when Ravitz was hired to light Gribbin's first big work, Tribe (1997), her response to having grown up in Northern Ireland. Stein says: "Even then I never understood why the classical music crowd was so paranoid about working with other artists like lighting designers. It becomes this issue of protecting the music. Why? We are enhancing the music."

The lighting for this show is on the scale of that of a West End musical. This is the first time Gribbin's performance has been so central. "It is very brave of Deirdre," says Stein. "I don't know many composers who would agree to participate as a character in their own work."

Gribbin has muddled through. "I am not used to having this acting role in performance. I must dress up to this extreme degree to actually be able to inhabit this Venusian character. The role is a manifestation of the colourful music."

Gribbin, born in Belfast, was inspired to write *Venus Blazing* while walking in the Hebrides in the dark, before dawn. "There were no electric lights, no sense of being in a contemporary world. I was drawn to looking at the skyline and noticed this incredibly bright star. I had that sense of my relationship as a human being to the planet and the wider universe." She began researching Venus and spent a year composing the score. "If the music has some of the fantastical elements of something beyond earth, that comes out in my character," she says. Gribbin has always had a hint of the theatrical about her. "I wore a sensible black Donna Karen suit [at performances], but always bright orange shoes," she says.

Gribbin composed the music for the last film starring Richard Harris, *My Kingdom* (2001) - inspired by *King Lear* and set in contemporary Liverpool - using Irish pipes and a string orchestra; she won an Arts Foundation award for her opera *Hey Persephone!* (1998) at the Aldeburgh and Almeida Festivals; and her orchestral work *Empire States*, played by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, was an award winner at Unesco's 2003 International Rostrum of Composers.

After her appearance as master of ceremonies in *Venus Blazing*, Gribbin will join the orchestra to play percussion. "I play bass drum, wind machine and gongs," she says. "There is a real dramatic tension having me in the piece in relation to the soloist." The first movement sounds as if music is coming out of nowhere, "like a tingling line passing along the orchestra, from the high-pitched piccolo and percussion to the deeper orchestral sounds of the cellos and double basses, transporting the audience to a magical world". The violinist is poised before launching into his musical dialogue. The middle of the concerto is slow, "very reflective and meditative", and the last movement is a raucous celebration of Venus, "inspired by Irish folk music of my childhood", with lots of drums and strings.

Gribbin's work will be played alongside that of the Scottish composer James MacMillan. His pieces - *A Meditation on Iona* and *The Road to Ardtalla* - are inspired by the desolation of Iona and Islay, and performed against a 30-metre backdrop of delicately etched glass by Sue Jane Taylor. "I am part of the extraterrestrial universe; he is earthbound," says Gribbin. She will spend the first half of the concert preparing for her role. Is it worth it? "Of course. I want an audience... We're in a contemporary society that responds to packaging. If, as an artist, you want to ignore that, do so at your peril," she says. "Why should [classical music] be left in the dark ages? I don't want to be writing music that takes me a year to write, only for 20 people to turn up."

The '*Venus Blazing*' Tour, Corn Exchange, Cambridge, 22 February; Warwick Arts Centre, 24 February; Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool, 25 February; Queen Elizabeth Hall, 27 February; St David's Hall, Cardiff, 2 March.